

A re-assessment of the affinities of some small Oriental babblers Timaliidae

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For some time I have been studying the babblers Timaliidae (or Timaliinae). They are generally rather sedentary birds that have diversified to produce a number of disparate forms, and this was reflected in their earlier classification which contained an unusually large number of genera with only one or two species (Sharpe 1883, Baker 1922). To some extent this situation still applies but in recent decades monotypic genera have been taxonomically unfashionable and there has been a tendency to lump them into larger groupings (Ali and Ripley 1971–1972). At times this appears to have been done by linking those nearest each other in published lists of the species.

I find myself in disagreement with some of these larger groupings and in addition a study of museum skins shows that some species should be re-assigned to more appropriate genera. While ultimately I hope to discuss these views in more detail elsewhere (Harrison in press, and in prep.), their summary here may stimulate fieldwork to confirm or refute them.

In order to define the various genera I have found it necessary to pay particular attention to aspects such as bill-structure, tail shape and the general pattern of plumage, but not necessarily the finer details of pattern or colour. It is possible that those who are fortunate enough to watch the living birds in the wild might be able to consider these ideas of relationship more critically or gain some further clues to affinities. They will not, of course, be in a position to review the scattered specimens from different parts of the ranges of widespread species which can justify conclusions that may not be obvious if only a single specimen is seen. However, because so many of these species are furtive by nature, the general behaviour of most babblers as living birds is very poorly known, and further study is needed. Even the appearance of young birds has not yet been recorded for some species. Admittedly young babblers tend to resemble the adults, but there may be differences in the plumage markings and in colour of iris and bill, and these usually more generalised characters may at times provide clues to possible origin and affinity.

WHITE-BELLIED BABBLER Currently known as the White-bellied Yuhina *Yuhina zantholeuca*, this occurs from the Himalayas to Sumatra and Borneo (Deignan 1964). Unlike yuhinas it is uniform olive-green or yellowish-green on the upperparts and head, and greyish-white on the underparts. The crown feathers are moderately elongated but not so markedly as in typical yuhinas. The key feature is the bill. This is stout (dorsoventrally deep) at the base and tapers evenly on both mandibles to a sharp tip. It differs distinctly from those of *Yuhina* species but matches those of the small babblers of the genus *Stachyris*. The other features of

structure and plumage pattern and colour would not be out of place in the latter genus, and I propose to transfer this babbler to it as the White-bellied Babbler *Stachyris zantholeuca*.

CHESTNUT-EARED BABBLER This species usually appears under the name of White-browed Yuhina or Striated Yuhina *Yuhina castaniceps*, and was earlier called the Chestnut-headed Staphida or Chestnut-headed Staphidia, the latter being a misspelling. In the past it has been lumped as constituting five species, now lumped as subspecies, in the genus *Staphida*, with a range from Bengal to Borneo (Deignan 1964). It lacks a distinct crest, and has a small blunt-tipped bill more like those of some fulvetta *Alcippe*. The tail is distinctly rounded with most of its feathers having bold white tips. It does not show any obvious affinities with the yuhinas; nor, for that matter, does it appear to fit satisfactorily into another existing genus, and I propose to return it to its monotypic genus. Plumage pattern and colour vary considerably between the various subspecies, and since the chestnut ear-coverts are one of the few consistent features I suggest that these would provide a more suitable name – the Chestnut-eared Babbler *Staphida castaniceps*.

CHESTNUT-BACKED MINLA This species is generally known as the Chestnut-backed Sibia (Rufous-backed Sibia in King *et al.* 1975) *Heterophasia annectans*, and occurs from the Himalayas to northern Thailand and Viet Nam (Deignan 1964). It does not resemble the other sibia species, which are reasonably consistent in their plumage patterns and generally slender build. Although larger, the Chestnut-backed Sibia resembles the Red-tailed Minla *Minla ignotincta* in bill-shape, general proportions and various aspects of plumage pattern. It appears to belong to this genus and I propose to re-assign it as the Chestnut-backed Minla *M. annectans*.

BLUE-WINGED SIVA This species occurs from the Himalayas to Malaya and Viet Nam (Deignan 1964). Formerly placed in the now unused genus *Siva*, it has in recent times been assigned to the genus *Minla* and the English name changed accordingly. If one discounts the extensive blue of the plumage as a purely specific character, it is closest in general appearance, and in aspects of head pattern and tail-feather shape, to the two species in the genus *Leiothrix* – the Pekin Robin or Red-billed Leiothrix *L. lutea*, and the Silver-eared Mesia *L. argentauris*. It differs from the minlas in almost all details. Its most appropriate place would appear to be either in the genus *Leiothrix* as *L. cyanouroptera*, or possibly retained in the monotypic genus *Siva*.

In listing these proposals I would add a comment based on my personal view that an English name should be no longer than is necessary to identify a species. The scientific name is the one that defines the taxonomic relationships. Since both the names *Siva* and *Minla* now apply to single species only, it would be reasonable to discard the adjectival appendages 'blue-winged' and 'silver-eared' and refer to these birds by the shorter name which adequately identifies them. Such rationalisation of names would be appropriate for a number of species not discussed here. Since I do not believe that the English name should be of the same hierarchical type as the

scientific one I do not see a problem in later taxonomic changes. I would prefer to see a series of short varied vernacular names as exemplified by the English names of European ducks and finches.

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Nepal House Martin *Delichon nipalensis* new to Thailand

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The observations described below were made at Phu Kradeung National Park in Loei Province, northern Thailand. The main topographical feature of the park is a 60 km² plateau rising from the surrounding lowlands at c. 300 m to a maximum of 1,360 m. Much of the perimeter of the gently undulating plateau is made up of a series of sandstone cliffs, which fall vertically c. 10–50 m to meet the steep slopes which in turn form the lower part of the plateau's sides.

On 30 November 1984, we watched a large mixed flock of hirundines and swifts at one of the cliffs, Pa Makduk, feeding over and out from the cliff edge. Brown Needletails *Hirundapus giganteus*, White-rumped Swifts *Apus pacificus* and Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* all fed singly or in small groups above the grassland and open pine woodland of the plateau itself and occasionally joined or flew through the main flock: hence the numbers of these species in the main flock were variable. The main flock fed primarily above the broadleaved forest on the slopes of the plateau's sides, just out from the cliff, and comprised about 40 Dusky Crag Martins *Hirundo concolor*, 50–60 Red-rumped Swallows *H. daurica* and 30 small house martins *Delichon* sp. Our field description of the house martins was as follows: 'Small